

## CRITICISM AND EDUCATION

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## Summary

If a goal in education is to develop the capacity for criticism, social consciousness, and responsible behavior, a preliminary analysis must keep account of the historical and social context of educational processes. In this context we must signal recourse to normalizing politics in educational discourse, patronized by the European Commission for so-called Knowledge Society. Rather than limit efforts to reproducing current social relations always the same, present-day educational systems should prepare us for new perspectives on how to organize social relations. The real issue today concerning educational systems, including at the university level, its engagement in globalized communication-production, is whether the globalized world governed by today's social reproduction system is changing as a result of communication-production itself; therefore, whether a globalized educational system, its adaptation to the world as it is, to this world, is by any chance an anachronism. Education at all levels must rediscover its educational role and respond to the times, to the present-day condition in history. Global semiotics provides a foundation for education, this means to evidence how signs play a role in our performances at all stages in the educational process, how they serve different ends, and are adequate or inadequate to communication.

Global semiotics contributes to education on a methodological level, from the theoretical foundations of education to specialized aspects of teaching and learning. The human being as a so-called "semiotic animal" is capable of a global perspective on semiosis and is responsible for the health of semiosis over the globe. For all these reasons we propose a semioethic approach to the relation between criticism and education. The disengagement of literary writing with respect to the obligations characterizing other writing genres where writing figures as mere transcription, frees it from special responsibilities, from responsibilities limited by alibis. Disengagement from partial and relative responsibility, limited responsibility, invests literary writing with the type of responsibility that knows no limits, with absolute responsibility, unlimited responsibility. This type of responsibility delivers the human being from all that may pose an obstacle to the free manifestation of what characterizes humans in their specificity as human beings. Our allusion is to language understood as the human potential for the infinite play of constructing – and deconstructing – new possible worlds

### 1. Introduction: The Context of Education Today

If a goal in education is to develop the capacity for criticism, social consciousness, and responsible behavior, a preliminary analysis must keep account of the historical and social context of educational processes.

Characteristics of today's globalized world include the automated industrial revolution, the global market (a quantitative fact of expansion and a qualitative fact which involves the capacity of transforming anything into merchandise), consumption of goods which are messages, and therefore pervasiveness of communication through the whole production cycle. Our economic reality today is Capitalism in the globalization phase, that is, in the communication-production phase. In this situation of globalized capitalism, communication is not limited to the intermediate phase in the productive cycle, but rather it converges with the whole productive cycle in all its phases

(production, exchange and consumption). In today's capitalist system as it has developed so far, control and dominion are achieved through control over communication relations and communication channels (which does not only mean mass media, but also such realities as oil pipelines). This implies control and dominion over market exchange and production. With the expansion of capitalism at a worldwide level, all communication programs are incorporated into a single global project which converges with the plan for developing the capitalist system – internal conflicts of interests apart. This plan is grounded in the reality itself of capital, which means that the ideology of capital is also its logic. From the perspective of communication, the consequence is that communication itself emerges as a unitary, compact, monologic block oriented by a single, dominant point of view. On the one hand, this orientation obliges one to speak according to a given logic; on the other, it imposes silence as a consequence of the order of discourse. This is no question of the “end of ideology”, as some have intimated. The real problem is that dominant ideology today, in this particular phase in the development of social reproduction, is in a position to impose and reproduce itself automatically, silently, without encountering any form of opposition.

### **1.1. Homologation and Reproduction of the Identical**

In a universe where everything communicates with itself, where that which is communicated regards Identity and its reproduction, communication is emptied and silence is imposed. In the relation between that which is interpreted (the interpreted) and that which interprets (the interpretant) there is no excess, no residual margin, no evasion; this relation is obtained on the basis of an identification process in which the sign's escape into the interpretant ends in return to self, negating the other and reasserting identity. On a verbal level, monologism in communication converges with the tendency towards *monolingualism*: externally this translates into linguistic imperialism, the imposition of one language over others; internally language is leveled onto a single language with the loss of effective diversity among internal languages, therefore with the loss of expressiveness, to the advantage of what is commonly considered as easy, direct, efficient and speedy communication. But homogenization does not involve verbal language alone. It concerns all behavior insofar as it is sign behavior. To a universal market there corresponds universal communication, which expresses the same needs, the same desires, and the same fancies. To a “closed universe of discourse” there corresponds a closed “universe of general communication”, the *human semiotic universe*. The entire planet is regulated by a single type of market, single type of production, single type of consumption. This means that behavior, habits, fashions (including dress fashion) have been homogenized, and even more seriously the imaginary, the capacity for the play of musement. In today's dominant communication-production system difference understood in terms of otherness is replaced ever more by difference understood in terms of alternatives. As Italo Calvino writes:

At times it seems to me that a pestilential epidemic has struck humanity in the faculty that characterises it most, i.e. its use of the word, a plague of language which manifests itself as the loss of cognitive force and immediacy, as automatism tending to level out expression into the most generic and abstract formulations, to dilute meanings, to blunt expressive heights, to put out all flashes

produced by words in new circumstances. But inconsistency is perhaps present not only in images or languages, but also in the world. This plague also strikes the life of people, the history of nations, thus rendering all (hi)stories formless, incidental, confused [...]. My uneasiness is for the loss of form which I observe in life [...] (Calvino, *Lezioni americane*, 1988: 59).

## **1.2. The Contradiction between Development, Competition, Employment and Protection of The Environment**

The “Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe”, states that:

The Union shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment.

The aim stated presents an insoluble contradiction. To unite high level competition as conceived by new-liberal ideology, full employment and high level protection of the environment is near impossible. This same contradiction characterizes the aims described by Jacques Delors in his so-called White book, produced by the European Community in 1994. The title itself *Development, Competition, Employment* presents an inversely proportional relation between *development* and *competition*, on one side, and *employment*, on the other. In the same way, the statement made in the “Treaty” presents an inversely proportional relation between the highly competitive social market economy, on one side, and full employment with high level protection and improvement of the quality of the environment, on the other. It is more than obvious that production functional to a highly competitive social market economy causes an increase in unemployment and destruction of the environment.

The global communication world is the world of communication for production, profit, and re-production of the same social reproduction system through all necessary means available, including war. The destructive character of global communication (the “destructive character” is an expression introduced by Walter Benjamin in 1931 to describe the capitalist socio-economic system at the dawn of Nazism) is evident in the destruction of the environment, in the increase of poverty, in unemployment which is structural to the world of global communication and worldwide, in exploitation of the South of the world by the North of the World, and in unfair distribution of wealth between a quarter of the world population – that belonging to the developed world – and all the rest of the world population – that belonging to underdevelopment. Unlike all earlier phases in social development, production today is endowed with an enormous potential for destruction which finds expression in the dramatic extremes of war (cf. Ponzio and Petrilli 2000). Consequently, life over the planet is in serious danger.

## **1.3. Innovation as Destruction**

In light of the connection between the European Commission with its programs and capitalist ideo-logic, is not at all surprising that the European Commission should identify “*innovation*” with “*destruction*,” indeed this is perfectly in line with the

destructive character of capitalism. The European Commission has devoted special attention to inventiveness and innovation functional to profit, to “immaterial investment” and “competition” (cf. *Green Book on Innovation*, 1995). According to the European Commission, the innovative character of products, goods and commodities paradoxically (but in line with capitalistic logic) consists in the capacity for destruction: new products must destroy products that are similar and readily available on the market. The capacity for innovation appropriate to “actual reality” converges with the capacity for destruction. In this context use of normalizing politics in educational discourse must be signaled: this practice is patronized by the European Commission for so-called Knowledge Society. In fact in the *Green Book on Innovation* similar to the other White or Green books produced by the European Commission, the only reference for formation, invention, creativity, innovation is the market, while the innovative character of the product itself consists in its capacity to destroy pre-existing products on the market. An example are CDs which over a relatively short period of time have made traditional records obsolete and useless as the whole stereo, similar to the fate of gramophones in the past. A more recent example is offered by DVDs which are now replacing traditional video tapes. The relation between inventiveness and destruction is revealing for anyone interested in understanding the ideo-logic which regulates society today.

#### **1.4. Education for a Free-Time Society**

Paradoxically, the development of capital, thanks to the automated industrial revolution and consequent reduction of work time, produces the necessary condition for liberation from indifferent work (“the end of work” has been examined from different points of view by such authors as Adam Schaff, André Gorz, Jeremy Rifkin). It next becomes a question of imagining new forms of social relations and employment where reduced labor time (which is currently converted into alienated surplus value and unemployment) and reduced production costs are not associated with increase in productivity and exchange value. Instead, they should be considered as a condition for the development of the single individual, a condition for increasing free-time for the sake of personal development and of society at large, therefore of the single individual as a social individual. In such a context free time for the development of society at large, of the social individual, is recognized as the true social wealth. The development of knowledge and education has central place in this process. Rather than limit efforts to reproducing current social relations, present-day educational systems should prepare us for this new perspective on how to organize social relations – a new, different and extraordinary perspective.

This problem (evidenced by Eric Weil 1992) has already emerged in all its topicality in the context of our *free society* as the problem of the relation between technological progress and our existential condition. Automated and therefore developed society is freed ever more from the oppression of work and work time, but at once suffers the negative consequences of this dual liberation because of a missing connection between scientific-technological development and values, between knowledge and education. The condition of liberation from work for an increasing number of people, therefore increase in free time for the many is an issue of central importance in today’s world. Liberation from work puts the individual in a position *to give a content* to existence. But

this content is yet to be identified in today's *free society*. People must avoid experiencing free time as a void, therefore losing themselves in that void and precipitating towards restlessness and boredom. The negative consequences of such a situation are all too familiar, especially with reference to the question of youth in opulent society. Thanks to technological development and automation, *increase in free time* for the masses is a concrete possibility. Free time is the condition of education for all. It is a question of passing from a situation where freedom is simply understood as emancipation from work to *concrete freedom*, that is, necessarily moral and political freedom, the possibility of acting responsibly towards others and self, which implies social and community responsibility. Dominant values circulating in today's society can be identified in such values as efficiency, productivity, competitiveness, and velocity, which contradict the possibility of making conscious choices and living a life that makes sense, that is, at high levels of sense and significance. Education at all levels must rediscover its educational role and respond to the times, to the present-day condition in history.

### **1.5. Criticism and Adaptation in University Education**

This is the problem faced by Jacques Derrida with his *Université sans condition* (1998), which he contrasts to a university system ready to adapt to globalization, to today's condition of *mondialization*, which implies *adapting to the world as it is*, being *realistic*, in the sense of *accepting the being of the world as it is*. The critical vocation of a university education is now sacrificed to the task of spreading communication-production; specifically, to increasing the communication capacity, the circulation of people – the labor market – within the circuits of information society. The issue is not whether university can be reduced to a business enterprise, whether it can adapt to “business philosophy”, indeed, we can still hope in the tendency towards excess and evasion with respect to dominant ideology, proper to research and university education.

The real issue concerning a globalized university system, its engagement in communication-production, is whether this world, a world governed by the capitalist system, is in fact changing as a result of communication-production itself, in its present phase of development; therefore, whether a globalized university system, its adaptation to the world as it is, to this world, is by any chance an anachronism; whether the effort to adapt to the labor market converges with the ever greater tendency to reduction of the labor market and disappearance of the labor force as part of a process that is irreversible, and with increase in unemployment which is proving to be ever more clearly not just a phase, but *structural* to the system. Consequently, “this world” itself – with the end of labor-merchandise and the metamorphosis of labor, the crisis of the “labor market” – is, in spite of itself, compliant with the university vocation for unconditional study and research. If university can ever be “without conditions”, as auspicated by Derrida, this will only be on the condition that it lets itself be conditioned by the new perspectives that are now emerging: that is, the end of commodified labor, the end of the “world of labor”, high level development in human capacities and social relations to the point that the base as well as the goals and interests of today's production system appear far too limited. We must repeat that the effort to make this base last, at all costs and with all possible means, is proving to be ever more dangerous,

and not only for “unconditional knowledge at university”, but for life itself, not only human life but for life over the entire planet.

## **2. Two Meanings of “Global Communication”**

The expression global or globalized communication has two different meanings. In the previous section it is used to refer to a characteristic phenomenon of our time: communication developed through technology, supported by the market and market logic, and extended over the entire globe. In this case the focus is on communication understood in social, cultural, economic and political terms. All this is connected with capitalism as it has developed so far. Globalization, therefore globalized communication exploited for capitalist profit, englobe human life in all its aspects: development, well-being and consumerism and underdevelopment, poverty and impossibility to survive; health and disease; normality and deviation; integration and emargination; employment and unemployment; transfer of the labor-force functional to emigration and instead migration – expression of the request for hospitality, which is denied; trade and use of legal merchandise and traffic in illegal merchandise – from drugs to non conventional weapons. Englobement is not limited to human life. Rather, life over the entire planet is now involved and incorporated (even compromised and put at risk).

However, globalization can also be understood in terms of “global semiotics,” the new perspective on the general science of signs inaugurated by Thomas A. Sebeok. From the socio-economic perspective globalization is limited and short-sighted given that it is functional to sectoral and egotistical interests, paradoxical as this may seem. Instead, the semiotic perspective evidences the condition of reciprocal involvement and interrelatedness among all life forms over the planet. And the condition of interrelatedness implies that in the long indifference towards the other, the tendency to oppress the other can only backfire on the oppressor.

### **2.1. Global Semiotics and Education**

In his programmatic theses on Semiotic and the School, Morris (1946) observed that to use semiotics as the foundation for education does not mean to introduce semiotics as a separate discipline with its technical terminology from early school years. Instead, the point is to evidence how signs play a role in our performances at all stages in the educational process, how they serve different ends, and are adequate or inadequate to communication.

... At the level of higher education, a specific and detailed study of semiotic can serve to raise to fuller awareness the training in the adequate use of signs which should have occurred throughout the earlier levels (326).

Semiotics contributes to education on a methodological level, from the theoretical foundations of education to specialized aspects of teaching and learning. Semiotic research in education is not only an area in education but also in semiotics. In his *Handbook of Semiotics*, W. Nöth (1990) dedicates a section (Teaching) in Chap. III, Semiosis, Code, and the Semiotic Field, to relations between semiotics and education. These include: issues of semiotics in teaching, which studies educational interactions as processes of semiosis and communication (cf. 221-222); the role of semiotics in

teaching school subjects (native language teaching, foreign language teaching; non-verbal and visual communication in the foreign culture; the semiotics of culture in foreign language teaching; semiotic foundations of teaching methodology; visual arts and media languages as school subjects (cf. 222-223); finally semiotics as a subject to be taught in University programs and schools (cf. 223-224). Nöth includes Thomas A. Sebeok among those who have contributed both to the description of teaching programs and syllabi for semiotics as a major or minor in university studies (see Sebeok 1976: 176-180; 1979: 272-279); and to the semiotic foundations of the theoretical and practical aspects of education (see Sebeok, Lamb, and Regan 1988).

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**Augusto Ponzio** (b. San Pietro Vernotico, Brindisi, Italy, 17 February 1942) is Full professor of Philosophy of language and General Linguistics at The University of Bari, Italy. In 1980 he founded the Institute of Philosophy of language, which he directed until 1998, when it was transformed into the Department of Linguistic Practices and Text Analysis, which he directed from 1998-2004. He is coordinator of a PhD program in Theory of Language and Science of Signs, which he inaugurated in 1988, and is now member of the Doctoral School in Human Sciences. He has contributed as curator and translator to the diffusion in Italy and internationally of the work of Peter Hispanus, Mikhail Bakhtin, Emmanuel Levinas, Karl Marx, Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, Adam Schaff and Thomas Sebeok. His principal research areas include philosophy of language, general linguistics, semiotics, communication theory, translation theory, and theory of literature. He has published over eighty monographs, almost 400 articles in various international reviews and miscellanies, and translated and edited approximately sixty volumes. The following are the titles of some of his more recent major publications: *Production linguistique et idéologie sociale* (1992), *Signs, Dialogue and Ideology* (1993), *El juego del comunicar. Entre literatura y*

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